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House Panel Assails CIA's Latin Role

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WASHINGTON — The House Intelligence Committee issued a blistering indictment Monday of the CIA's covert support for Nicaraguan exiles fighting the leftist government in their homeland.

In a 44-page public report, the Democratic-controlled committee called the Central Intelligence Agency operation a failure and said it was "counterproductive" to U.S. interests in Central America. The report strongly suggested that the administration violated a law forbidding the use of U.S. funds to pursue the overthrow of the Sandinista government in Managua.

As a result of the operation, it charged, "innocent lives" were lost and the reputations of the United States and the CIA were tarnished.

CIA official Kathryn Riedel said the agency has "no comment at this point" on the report. White House spokesman Mort Allin said: "We have not had a chance to study the full report and therefore it is a little premature for us to comment on it."

In detailed fashion, the report — the first on the controversial action in Central America since it was launched 18 months ago — chronicled the development of the operation and the initial misgivings about it expressed by several committee members, including its chairman, Rep. Edward Boland (D., Mass.).

The intelligence panel made the report public to explain why it approved a bill May 3 that seeks the end of the covert aid and the creation of an \$80-million "overt" fund to help friendly Central American governments halt the flow of weapons from Nicaragua and Cuba to insurgents in their countries.

That bill, passed by a partisan vote of 9-5 reflecting the intelligence committee's Democratic majority, will be considered Wednesday by the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Legislators who support President Reagan's policies in Central America are expected to offer amendments to weaken it and allow the covert action to continue.

The five Republican committee members who voted against the bill — including C.W. (Bill) Young of Florida — filed a dissenting view, saying the report was inaccurate in charging that the administration had violated the law.

Their minority view said the bill "would deprive the executive

branch of authority to conduct a critical and effective element in its policy to thwart the emerging threat of Cuban-Nicaraguan-sponsored insurgencies in Central America."

In a lengthy statement included in the report, Young said the covert operation did have the "desired effect" of interfering with Nicaraguan arms shipments to El Salvador. Young suggested that if the bill became law, it would free Cuba and Nicaragua to continue their "assault on Central America."

The report said formally for the first time that the original goal of the covert action, as outlined by the administration and authorized by the intelligence oversight panels, was to halt Cuban and Nicaraguan weapons shipments to guerrillas fighting the U.S.-backed government in El Salvador.

The central segment of the report said: "In its final review of the [covert] program, the committee asked three questions: Is the program consistent with the law and with the direction of the Congress? Is the program a wise one? Is the program successful?"

"As to the first question, the law says that the program may not have the purpose to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. . . . The committee has reached the point where it is unwilling to assure the House that the present program meets [this requirement].

"The second question — is this wise? The committee is forced to respond in the negative. Inflicting a bloody nose on nations achieves a purpose no different with nations than with individuals. It tends to instill a deep desire to return the favor. The Sandinistas are no different. Their policies have not softened.

"Finally, and most important, the program has not interdicted arms. In 18 months, the committee has not seen any diminishment in arms flow to the Salvadoran guerrillas, but rather repeated border clashes

followed recently by heavy fighting well inside Nicaragua. In the process, innocent lives have been lost."

As to the CIA, the report said the covert operation "hurts" the agency because again it has been subjected to public scrutiny, as during the 1970s when it was denounced for unsavory activities.

It also accuses the CIA and the administration of misleading the committee on its objectives in Nicaragua. The report charges that CIA briefers who reported to the committee on the covert action kept changing stated goals and periodically reported changing numbers and tactics of the anti-Sandinista insurgents receiving U.S. aid.

"The United States has allied itself with insurgents who carry the taint of the last Nicaraguan dictator [Anastasio] Somoza," the report said. "[It] has allowed the spotlight of international opprobrium to shift from [Sandinista] attempts to subvert a neighboring government [El Salvador] to attempts to subvert that of Nicaragua."

It said the committee began to lose faith in administration briefings on the operation when briefers told the panel that the CIA had several other goals in mind, including the democratization of Nicaragua and pressure on the Sandinistas to call elections and hold negotiations with the opposition.

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The committee also expressed "distress" at the number of insurgents supported by the program, the report said. Although it did not cite a figure, committee sources have said the CIA told them the CIA-backed Nicaraguan Democratic Force insurgent group grew from 500 members in 1981 to its present strength of about 7,000.

The Republican-controlled Senate Intelligence Committee approved a bill two weeks ago that would allow the CIA to continue the covert operation until Sept. 30, but withhold money for the program in 1984 pending a report to Congress by Reagan defining his administration's policy goals in Nicaragua.

The controversy developed after members of the House and Senate intelligence panels publicly accused the administration several weeks ago of violating congressional guidelines that prohibit the use of federal money to overthrow the Sandinista government.